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WHAT NEXT FOR AMERICAN LABOR?

by **JAY LOVESTONE**

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"We are in the midst of one of the most important periods in the history of our nation. There is so much at stake, so much hanging in the balance," William Green pointedly told the Fifty-third Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor after it unanimously reelected him as its President.

These times are crowded with events moving faster than foreseen by most and than seen by many. As if over night, the American trade union movement has grown to be the biggest in the world, next to that of Soviet Russia. American labor, in the fifth year of economic crisis, faces an entirely new situation, in many respects fundamentally different from the political and socio-economic conditions prevailing but a year ago. The new rôle of the government in industry (NRA), the organic structural changes in American economic life growing out of certain inherent features of our present system of production and exchange, the new mood of the workers after years of crisis, some recent disasters befalling the labor movement of other countries, the United States becoming more and more

involved in world affairs at their tensest—are but a few of the most powerful factors transforming the milieu and the problems confronting the American labor movement.

In a vague, confused way the Fifty-third Convention of the A. F. of L. sensed that it could not simply stand pat in the face of a country in flux and in the face of a swiftly changing world. But, sooner rather than later, American labor will have to answer definitely many of the new questions now sorely pressing for solution. How the answers will be made and what sort of answers they will be, will prove of decisive import not only for the American workers, not only for the United States as a whole, but for the entire world as well.

The New Situation Facing the Labor Movement

What is the new situation which American labor faces? What are the features of the new conditions in which our trade union movement now finds itself? What are its perspectives?

1. The mounting wave of strikes, involving more than half a million toilers, is the outstanding phenomenon in the life of the American workers today. For years, in the darkest days of joblessness, privation and hunger, labor appeared to be apathetic, silent, paralyzed. Recent months have seen Amer-

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ican labor, organized and unorganized, swerve sharply in its course and begin to develop a new attitude and new action. Here the champion of labor finds much encouragement and hope. On the other hand, to the champions of capital, the very size of the strikes, their militancy and magnitude, their geographical diversity are a source of deep disturbance, an ominous sign of storm brewing chaos and even Red Revolution.

Why this great wave of strikes? In part, it is to be accounted for by the very beginnings of economic revival evident for some months. The workers have a sort of sixth sense, as it were, to apprehend and seize the moments of faintest economic improvement for recouping some of their losses incurred in the years of acute depression. There is yet another reason for the recent wave of strikes which has still to reach its peak. It is the impact of the NRA, the objective logic of its application rather than the desires of its initiators or the intentions of its administrators. Of course, Section 7a of the NRA does not order or suggest labor's unionization. Yet, the mere abstract legal recognition of the workers' right to organize has momentarily proved a great stimulus to the revival of trade unionism. It has given rise to a widespread feeling in the ranks of labor that the Federal Administration is no longer opposed or is even favorably disposed to their organizing

into unions. Whether this feeling is justifiable or not is of secondary consequence along side of the fact that this very notion has served to help remove certain inhibitions and restraints hitherto seriously impeding the workers' mood and ability to struggle.

2. As a direct consequence of this fighting mood among the workers, the A. F. of L. has, in the last months, seen a great expansion of its organization, a vast influx of masses into its ranks. Spontaneously on many occasions, workers hitherto unorganized, without trade union experience, poured into the A. F. of L. by the thousands. Unionism has been permeating even the most backward strata of workers, men and women, Negro and white, native and foreign-born, workers of all ages. This is the third great wave of trade union organization passing over the country. In 1901-1904 800,000 were recruited into the unions. From 1916-1920, about 2,000,000 members were added to the A. F. of L. roster. In the present wave, almost 2,000,000 have joined the A. F. of L. ranks in about one year, with the high water-mark not yet in sight and with certain basic heavy industries like steel, automobile, oil and rubber now in the first stages of organization.

This strongest wave of organization has mainly arisen out of the same forces which gave impetus to the strike wave. Mr. Howard, President of the International Typo-

graphical Union, gave only a partial explanation of the mushroom-like growth of trade unions in many instances when he declared to the last A. F. of L. convention that Section 7a of the NRA regarding "The right of employees to organize and select representatives of their own choice, without interference on the part of employers, or their agents, has had the effect of freeing the flood of organization sentiment existing in the breasts of millions of workers who have been prevented by employer opposition from satisfying their desire for organization."

3. "One has the defects of one's qualities," say the French. With the A. F. of L. its very mounting numerical strength is betraying its most painful organization weakness. The strike and organization waves are further weakening its archaic, craft underpinnings and structure. It is precisely those A. F. of L. unions which are outright or partly industrial in character, that is, which are organized along plant, "vertical" or industrial lines, which have had the greatest growth recently. Thus, the United Mine Workers of America (U.M.W. of A.) has gained about 200,000 members; the revival of the Brewery Workers Union is spectacular; the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, but yesterday the twenty-third in size, is now the third biggest union with 190,000 members; and the hundreds of federal charters

granted to local unions, often called plant unions, with a membership of over 500,000, are a further strengthening of industrial unionism inside the American Federation of Labor. On the other hand, it is the strictly craft or horizontal unions which have either grown least or in some cases have even been losing membership throughout the strike and organization waves.

Furthermore, the very narrow craft structure, still dominant in the A. F. of L. as shown in the rejection by the convention of even half-hearted measures towards industrial unionism, gives rise to serious jurisdictional disputes between labor organizations. These jurisdictional controversies are not only a great obstacle to the organization of those already organized. A dispute between iron workers and carpenters as to who should install radiator covers in the new Interstate Commerce Commission and Labor Department Building in Washington kept more than a thousand men idle for five weeks. Such constantly recurring incidents are always eagerly seized upon by the proponents of the open shop as effective talking points against trade unionism.

This question of trade union structure which has for many years been a burning issue in the ranks of labor is today brought into boldest relief by the very transformation which American industry has undergone. The

rapid development of mass production in industry makes the organization of workers along craft lines outworn, today really artificial, very difficult, and when attained, at best, ineffective as a means of collective bargaining or as a strike weapon in the hands of labor. The A. F. of L. convention, despite its reaffirmation of loyalty to and faith in craft unionism, has been compelled to recognize this significant feature of the new situation and the coming months will see even the most conservative leaders yielding to the inexorable logic of economic development and resorting more and more to the industrial form of union organization.

4. An equally perennial issue in the American labor movement has been the problem of dual unionism—the organization of radical, revolutionary, or sometimes ultra-reactionary, unions to compete with A. F. of L. bodies. The sweep of labor unity in the strike and organization wave has been entirely towards and through the conservative unions of the American Federation of Labor. In this tidal wave, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, with its membership of 125,000 has been swept into the A. F. of L. after an independent existence of nearly 20 years. This wave has drowned out dual unionism and swept into the debris of the crisis most of the split-off, dual unions set up by the official Communist Party and its trade union depart-

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ment, the Trade Union Unity League, in the last five years or so.

We are now witnessing the total collapse of the new dual unionism of the official Communist Party which has replaced the I.W.W. as the leading and most active force for splitting away radical and revolutionary workers from the conservative unions and collecting them into pure revolutionary organizations. This bankruptcy of Communist dual unionism is only the reverse of the simultaneous process of the growth of the bonafide American trade union movement in the A. F. of L. The guiding spirits of the new dual union movement predicated their success on the assumption that the American Federation of Labor was through, could not grow any more, and that a new, an out and out revolutionary, actually a Communist, trade union movement, was, therefore, on the order of the day.

Thus, already in January 1929, William Z. Foster, once the most vigorous opponent, and now an equally vigorous proponent, of dual unionism posed the problem: "What is the future of the A. F. of L. and the craft unions generally? Are they definitely in decline as labor organizations? This question of perspective of the A. F. of L. becomes very important because in it is involved the question of whether or not there is a real base for the development of the new industrial union movement." Foster, carrying out the instruc-

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tions of the Communist International, hastened to answer unequivocally: "The A. F. of L. is definitely in decline as a labor organization. It cannot and will not organize the unorganized." The latest events have shown the utter falsity of Foster's conclusions and perspectives.

It was over dual unionism, more than over any other issue, that the American Communist movement has been seriously split into two main factions—with the official Communist Party feverishly working for dual unionism, in one form or another, and the Communist Party (Opposition) energetically working inside the conservative unions to strengthen them, to improve them, to transform them into militant powerful labor organizations. The conservative A. F. of L. leaders' being able to have, for the last five years, peace and quiet in the unions, without any serious challenge by progressive or radical workers, is, in no small measure due to the voluntary withdrawal, on a large scale, on the part of "left" wing forces from the main stream of the American labor movement. Had there not been a revival of dual unionism, of union-splitting, five years ago, under the official Communist Party banner, the United States undoubtedly would have had many more serious labor struggles in the last years of acute crisis. Unwillingly the official Communists have played into the hands of the

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most conservative trade union officials. Senator Wagner very correctly pictured this situation in congratulating the A. F. of L. convention for the peace and quiet prevailing in labor ranks for years: "No such record would be possible without fine leadership. President Green and the other officers of the A. F. of L. have been temperate in counsel despite intense grief at the plight of their people."

5. But if the conservative leaders of the A. F. of L. have been given a free hand by the official Communists, who inspired and directed the exodus of great numbers of militants from the unions into the promised land of a new pure Red unionism, they have, nevertheless, been unable and, in most cases, unwilling, to wield this free hand sufficiently for the purpose of pushing the organization of the existing unions. During the convention, President Green, speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington, beseeched the employers, sermonized American labor and underscored its policy as the message of Paul to the Colossians: "Masters, render unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a Master in Heaven."

Few big employers of labor realize how devoutly the dominant American trade union leadership has been keeping the faith with this doctrine of Paul, with this Master and Servant catechism. Still fewer employers are appreciative of the thankless tasks the trade

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union leaders have keeping down unrest, holding up strikes as long as possible and then reducing their militancy once they have broken out. President McMahon of the United Textile Workers gives us some insight into the desperate efforts being made by America's outstanding trade union leaders to hold back the tidal strike wave. With great pride and satisfaction he told the A. F. of L. convention: "No man nowhere has tried more determinedly than I have to avoid chaos in the industry. . . . In my office there are not hundreds but thousands of appeals from the workers demanding that they be allowed to strike. The vast majority of those appeals have come from the South." Mr. McMahon has not exaggerated his efforts or made any false claims for his "achievements" to date. So far the strike wave has hardly touched any of the States below the Mason and Dixon line.

6. However, not in all cases has this policy of class collaboration, of peaceful arrangements with the employers, succeeded in holding back, in checking the militancy of the workers. Many factory hands have been developing a feeling that things have gotten about as bad as can be tolerated, that they have nothing more to lose and at least something to gain by striking, by fighting hard, in energetic picketing and dramatic demonstrations.

Take the case of the bitter textile struggles

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thruout the east lasting nearly two months. In Paterson, for instance, organizer Eli Keller calls for a thousand pickets to appear at strike headquarters at 6 A. M. and in response, more than double this number rally at the union hall hours ahead of schedule to march, sing, picket and shout defiance at the police, the tightly-shut factories and the NRA textile code offering them only \$13 a week, or less than half of their own minimum demands. The dogged determination of the coal diggers in Fayette County, Western Pennsylvania, battling against the persistent refusal of the Frick interests to accord the U.M.W. of A. recognition is another case in point. The loyalty of these starved miners to this organization is all the more amazing because many of these workers have not yet forgotten their disappointing experience with the U.M.W. of A. in the 1922 strike when this union left them out of the national settlement. Very few of these strikers like the incessant efforts at negotiation and compromise being made by John L. Lewis and his aides; yet, the coal diggers continue to battle against terrific odds for their right to be members of the United Mine Workers.

At the same time, it would be foolhardy to conclude that these embittered strike conflicts are evidence that the American workers have become radicalized or revolutionists. These spirited strikes are only signs of the first

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awakening of American labor, struggles for basic elementary rights which assume paramount political import under the NRA but which, in themselves, in their demands and in the consciousness of their leadership, are not at all revolutionary.

7. Finally, under the impact of the above forces, deep-going changes are in the making in the structure and leadership of the trade union movement. The beginnings of disillusionment with the NRA are already visible. Witness the sweeping strike sentiment and general dissatisfaction with the NRA in the auto industry despite Roosevelt's personal energetic intervention for "peace." More and more workers are beginning to look upon the Roosevelt-Green settlement as a "Great Betrayal" of the most fundamental interests of all labor.

This disillusionment and disappointment will become more marked as the revival of the fighting power of the unions grows. The influx of hundreds of thousands of new members will, on the one hand, tend to serve as a leaven for militancy and, on the other hand, their inexperience and backwardness may serve as a source of additional support for inaction and conservatism in the unions. The problem of assimilation and education of this great mass of newly organized workers will become more and more pressing. Naturally, sharp differences will develop and new realignments

will materialize in the ranks of the labor movement as to how to solve the numerous complex problems. The divisions over the NRA, over craft unionism, over independent political action will cut clearly across every section of the trade union organizations from the officialdom down to the rank and file.

Historically speaking, the Gompers monument unveiled during the last A. F. of L. convention was timely and symbolic. The bronze memorial to Gompers may well be considered as a dedication to an age in American labor that has begun to vanish and that may fade away much faster than many labor leaders, too close to the picture, can see or wish. And with the passing of this era there will also fade out of the picture many leaders who have been at the helm in the trade union movement for more than a quarter or more than a third of a century—the passing of scores of parochial Pollyannas, as the more youthful and vigorous trade union leaders call them. Mr. Tobin, Vice-president of the A. F. of L., admitted as much when resisting the proposal to enlarge the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor from eight to fifteen, he pleaded that "the success of the labor movement *for the coming year at least* depends upon a continuation of the present form of the Executive Council."

Labor and the NRA

The whole new situation confronting the

labor movement is developing within the framework of the NRA which is profoundly transforming the social and economic relations in the U. S. and which, therefore, has implications of decisive character for the whole working class. The policies and tactics of American labor in the coming years will be framed on the basis of the new situation created by the NRA.

The NRA with its "systematic plan of economic recovery" through reemployment by shortening the work-week and increasing purchasing power through minimum wage provisions, at first received heartiest endorsement and lavish support from the workers, organized and unorganized. It was hailed as "the greatest legislative victory ever achieved by labor in the U. S." General Johnson, Commander-in-Chief of the New Recovery Army, NRA, was lauded by William Green only a few minutes before he delivered his anti-strike blast at the last A. F. of L. convention, as "the very best man who was needed to serve as Administrator of the National Recovery Act." The *American Federationist*, the official organ of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L., even turned to poetry to proclaim: "Black hopelessness yields to elation, Exultant the cry, NRA!" In a sense this attitude was all the more surprising because of labor's bitter experiences with that first American "Magna Charta of Labor"—Wilson's Clayton Act which, the trade unions charged, was used by

the courts as a weapon against unionization.

But the "honeymoon" period of labor and the NRA is rapidly disappearing. The building trades workers have been aroused by the code setting their wages at 40c in those areas where wages were previously higher and at thirty cents where wages were usually set at this sum. "The auto code with its merit clause giving the employers the ultimate right to hire and fire has produced much resentment among many workers. The insistence of the NRA on a \$13 weekly wage scale for the textile workers in the North and on \$12 in the South has aroused much bad blood among the seventy thousand textile workers (who recently struck) in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and throughout the North. Many of them feel that the NRA is actually widening the gap between their wages and the cost of living. At the A. F. of L. convention, one delegate drew the wrapt attention of the audience when he stressed that: "It (the NRA) means that our unions become merely loud-speakers for broadcasting decrees of a government which is still a government of wealth and entrenched in private and corporate privilege. . . . The only consideration which labor has received from the NRA has been through strikes or the fear of strikes."

However, some of the latest declarations of policy made by General Johnson and Senator

Wagner, Chairman of the National Labor Board, have put even some of the most conservative labor leaders ill at ease. The A. F. of L. convention did not get much cheer out of Senator Wagner's advice: "The first charge upon labor is that it abandon the philosophy of strife in its relation with employers" and that "the crucial point is that the strike is never *more* than a protest. It has no constructive force. It creates hundreds of new problems, but cannot solve a single one." What particularly rocked labor's confidence in the NRA was General Johnson's thundering at the convention that "labor does not need to strike under the Roosevelt plan. . . . The plain truth is that you cannot tolerate the strike. Public opinion is the essential power in this country. In the end it will break down and destroy every subversive influence" and if "you persist or countenance this economic sabotage, (the strike), that public confidence and opinion will turn against you."

It is the strike wave which has caused the National Labor Board to drop its "benevolent neutrality" and to begin to swing and to prepare to wield the "Big Stick." The demand of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. that labor shall itself become part of the machinery of government, that labor officials take permanent posts on all NRA boards in executive and advisory capacities is largely a first and panicky reaction to this whole trend. More and more workers are beginning to feel

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and fear that what they are facing is not only government intervention but also *government ownership of their unions*. It is not only the radical workers who dread such "socialism." Throughout the trade unions there is a growing belief that Mary Van Kleeck, of the Russel Sage Foundation, was right when she resigned her NRA post because she concluded that: "The seeds of Fascism are being sown among American workers by vital faults in the NRA program. . . . The employers are gaining by being released from the prohibition of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law. But labor gains nothing. . . . The Administration has not given the workers a chance on the ground floor."

What Next?

Regardless of what some labor leaders may still feel or government officials may yet promise, *the gravest challenge to trade unionism*, as we have known it in the U. S., lies in the fact that, by taking over full control of wages and hours and assuming the power of interfering in the inner concerns of the labor organizations, *the NRA will increasingly tend to undermine the very basis of unionism by attempting to deprive it of its essential functions*. Such a policy of the government, if successful, would transform the working class unions of the A. F. of L. into virtual Fascist "corporate unions." Fierce resistance will be the answer of labor to the sundry plans

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of reformers and government officials to launch a so-called "quasi-public unionism—to make labor unions a normal and integral part of the industrial system and to integrate its relations with management, thru a co-ordinated system of special institutions which may perform the functions assigned to labor." It is in this sense that even the original Wagner Bill on unionism was a serious menace to the right to organize—despite the fact that it had the blessing of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. And, in its revised form on the basis of the Roosevelt-Green auto peace pact, the Wagner Bill is so obviously harmful to labor that not even the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. dares to endorse it.

With equal energy labor will resist General Johnson's proposal to the A. F. of L. convention for the establishment of so-called "vertical" (industrial) unions, each entirely divorced from the similar organizations in other industries, completely deprived of their character and rights as potential or actual fighting organizations against the employers and subject to an official system of government supervision, control and 'absolute veto.'" All such "unions" would, in substance, be Fascist "corporate unions" and poles apart from even the most conservative A. F. of L. unions which at bottom are working class bodies.

Hence, in the coming months we will see labor zealously defending the right to strike,

picket, and to organize into genuine trade unions. Embittered hostility to company unionism will be marked in the ranks of labor, as the NRA develops its new policy towards trade unionism. Although the theory of class collaboration is still officially retained in all its features by the A. F. of L. leadership trade union practice will accentuate the tendency towards militancy as evidenced in the last months.

The Blue Eagle hovering over American labor will *objectively* serve to hasten the unification of the workers. The craft unions will speed up their amalgamation into industrial unions, as a matter of self-defense. Unions today having initiation fees of \$1000-1500 will be forced to take away these barriers because of the heavy influx of new members which will continue for some time yet. Even the barriers against Negroes entering the unions will be undermined and hacked away due to the pressure of events. In the recent dressmakers' strike in New York, many Negro workers were not only drawn into the struggle but welcomed into Local 22, the dressmakers local of the I.L.G.W.U. Foreseeing this trend, delegate Robert J. Watt of the Massachusetts Federation of Labor, told the A. F. of L. convention rather picturesquely: "We are trying to warp them (the workers) to suit the needs of our constitution and I suggest that we go into reverse and start

warping our constitution to suit the needs of the wage earners of America." More than that, the outlook is clearly for labor to resort to independent political action, to some form of Labor Party organization based primarily on the trade unions, in order to defend its rights encroached upon by the government officialdom.

All of these new trends, all of these new moods of the workers, the reactions of labor to the whole new situation created by the NRA were, at the recent Washington convention of the A. F. of L., reflected only in the distorting mirror of an officialdom which is increasingly less and less representative of the new feelings and thoughts of the rank and file millions, organized and unorganized. In short, *the American labor movement has entered a new period of development.* The years of apathy and inertia, of organization decline and moral decay, which threatened the very existence of unionism in this country, have now definitely come to an end.

Under the impact of the NRA there has been created a new situation for American labor—full of dangers in the long run and some vantage points in the immediate. Should American labor continue to develop its recent militancy and unity, then, it will march forward as a powerful independent force remoulding America in its own image and building an entirely new social and economic order

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—a socialist soviet order. If American labor should fail to grasp the logic of events, the inner logic of social relations, then, the new America will be a corporation America, with large sections of the Fascist superstructure all set up even before the political and economic foundations for Fascism are completed, even before the Fascist state is completely established.

These are the long range perspectives for American labor already visible at this critical hour in the life of the nation. On the road which labor will travel, to the Right or to the Left, will depend the answer to the question whether the U. S. will have a government which will openly have only interests identical with business and be inseparable from business or a government which will openly have only like interests with labor and be inseparable from labor.

Which of these perspectives will come to life in the United States will profoundly affect the course of the world for decades. In the last resort the turn that events will take depends largely on two factors. These are: First, the desire and ability of the revolutionary workers, the communists, to work constructively inside the conservative A. F. of L. unions for their transformation into militant industrial unions; secondly, the industry and ability of the revolutionary and more progressive workers to take the leadership in educating

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and assimilating the millions of new A. F. of L. members, the hundreds of thousands of workers who have been pouring and will continue to pour into the unions.

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